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THE CASE OF LITERATURE

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I. DIAGNOSIS

. . . . Ridentem dicere verum
Quid vetat?

A writer in a recent number of one of the most pretentious of our classical publications propounds the question: Is there a science of classical philology?—a query which may be interpreted: Is there unity enough in the subject-matter and methods of classical study to warrant its being called by a single name? or, does the term classical philology convey the same concept to all students, teachers, and friends of the classics?

Without intending it, both the article and the periodical which contains it give a negative answer: the latter, which is called, appropriately enough, *Classical Philology*, by the statement of purpose which it bears on its cover: "A quarterly journal devoted to research in the languages, literatures, history, and life of classical antiquity," and by its table of contents, which represents matter ranging over the whole field of Mediterranean antiquity, from the gates of early dawn to the setting sun; and the former by its definition of classical philology as "the imaged microcosm of a single civilization," whose different provinces "represent the avenues through which racial and national thought and impulse found expression in language and literature, cults, institutions, customs, art, and philosophy."¹

Surely if the professor of the science represented in this varied and comprehensive programme attains to anything like proficiency, he may easily be classed with ancient Apuleius, one of whose works bears the modest title, *De Mundo—On the Universe*; or with the mediaeval scholar whose contribution to knowledge, presumably his *magnum opus*, was *De Omnibus Rebus et Aliis*; or with Talkative, who will discourse to Faithful "of things heavenly, or things earthly; of

¹ *Class. Phil.*, October, 1908, p. 383.

things moral, or things evangelical; things sacred, or things profane; things past, or things to come; things foreign, or things at home; things more essential, or things circumstantial."

Teachers of modern foreign language, and of English literature, and of other cultural subjects, may enjoy their smile at the classics. But—*rides? mutato nomine de te*—change the name, and the slam is on you. I refer to the classics only by way of introduction; my subject is really literature as a whole. Whether we turn to the field of study of ancient literature or of modern, we find everywhere the same learned miscellany, the same variety, the same nimety. From an examination of our journals devoted to the study of literature; from our dissertations and graduate announcements and language association programmes; from listening to the demonstration at the seminary table or to the doctoral examination; and from scanning the lists of undergraduate theses and topics, the impartial observer who had not been initiated into the mysteries of literary study might suspect that the literary professor of today had as his motto: I am a professor of literature, and nothing that concerns it as literature do I consider as having the remotest connection with my purpose.

If this remarkable variety in the visible product of literary scholarship denoted a completely corresponding lack of unity in the purposes and methods of instruction in literature, the case of literary study would be alarming indeed. But we who are in the secret of the profession know that it is not so bad as that; the great majority of professors of literature, both ancient and modern, even of those who contribute the humorous articles to philological magazines which pass under the name of literary scholarship, really teach literature.

Yet, however exaggerated may be the ideas of the impartial observer, there is a real lack of unity in the teaching of literature, and no one will be disposed to deny it who is at all familiar with the protests which are being put forth in ever greater number by both layman and professor. A committee of nine has been appointed "to collate and digest the leading articles of more recent years and to formulate the common aims and purposes of classical study;"¹ teachers of English literature have not yet settled on "what subjects

¹ *Class. Jour.*, June, 1908, p. 298.

and methods are best adapted to meet the needs of the undergraduate;”¹ there are men in every departmental faculty who criticize modern tendencies with more or less freedom; and the wide and favorable editorial and epistolary comment on so severe an indictment of literary study as that of Irving Babbitt affords no uncertain indication that teachers of literature are not of one mind together in their purposes.

We are in need of something which shall bring unity to our scattered forces both in reality and in that seeming which has given us in the eyes of the public a worse reputation as a class than we deserve.

To what shall we look for a basis of unity in the teaching of literature? Since the question is one which concerns the teaching of literature both ancient and modern, I allow a professor of English to answer:

The principal aim of instruction (in literature)—not the sole aim, but the principal aim of instruction—should ever be to impart its peculiar element of culture. Now there is almost universal agreement that literature is an art. The study of literature is, therefore, primarily the study of an art—not the study of history, not the study of philosophy, not the study of science. . . . We shall find general agreement that the peculiar, the supreme thing that art has to offer is not generalization, not speculation, not information, but the individual work of art itself. . . . In art the individual phenomenon is all important . . . its interest, its chief human value lies in itself. In the study of literature, then, the thing of supreme importance is the interpretation and appropriation of the individual work of literature.²

These assertions are not so questionable as to require argument. Let the object of the present inquiry be rather to account for the apparent failure to realize their truth in the teaching of literature.

Much of the responsibility for the discredit into which the study of literature has fallen is to be laid at the door of a comparatively small number of its representatives. They are to be found in higher institutions rather than in the schools, and are the writers of the books and dissertations with which our library shelves are crowded, and the contributors of the erudite articles which appear in the learned periodicals—in other words, they are our doctors of philosophy and the learned professors into whom they evolve. To be still more explicit, if we divide teachers of literature into three classes: first,

¹ *Pub. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XXIII. 3, p. 258.

² *Pub. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XXIII. 3, p. 255.

those whose interest is primarily philological (under this include syntax, statistics, etc.); second, those whose interest is chiefly historical (here belong archaeology, religion, etc.); and third, those whose main concern is criticism in the broadest sense and whose ideal is the teaching of literature as literature—the objects of my animadversion may be found principally among the first two.

It is from these that the world at large forms its conception of literary learning and literary instruction. It is from them, too, that the prospective teacher of literature who is brought into contact with them in college or through the medium of books and other publications naturally forms his ideas and ideals of scholarship and instruction. Upon them, therefore, depends very largely the esteem in which the study of literature is held by the public, and also in no small measure the spirit of instruction among the rank and file of teachers. They are the leaders and spokesmen of the literary host.

They are more than that. They are in a measure its tyrants, for they constitute the controlling influence in the graduate school, and determine the spirit of graduate instruction and academic promotion—a spirit which is today inimical to the best interests of literary study.

But before I tread farther over fires hidden beneath the treacherous ash, let me recite my credo. I believe in research, and I believe in the graduate system. I do not believe that the teacher should only teach, or the investigator engage only in research. I believe that the teacher should be a productive scholar, and that the productive scholar should be a teacher, and that each will best do the work that lies nearest his heart if he engages in the other also. I believe that teaching gives the scholar balance, and that research and original production assure to the teacher vividness of interest and continued growth. The contributions of both—equally great in different ways—will most effectively find their way into the great sum of human life if by a union of their activities in the same person breadth and sanity are preserved in the investigator, and in the teacher the constantly stimulated intellectual curiosity which insures progressive development. I am not going to advocate the abandonment of the doctor's degree, or of the dissertation.

Finally, I am discussing the teaching of literature, not of science;

and I protest as much against the application of my remarks to science as I shall deprecate the application of the methods of the scientist to the study of literature.

But to my task. For the sake of clearness, we may glance at certain well-known features of the graduate system as it is at present administered: the necessity of the doctor's degree if the candidate is to get a position in a higher institution; the necessity, in order to get the degree, of specializing in one major and two minor subjects, with such emphasis on the connection between the major and first minor as to make them virtually one subject; the necessity of pursuing knowledge in these one or two subjects principally by means of seminary courses which take as their province only sections of the main subject; the necessity of still further narrowing the range of interest by writing and publishing a dissertation on some minute section of one of these sections of the subject, severely scientific in method, impersonal and impassive in style, absolutely original in subject and content, and (if possible) of some value to scholarship; and finally, if the doctor who has become an instructor is to be promoted or "called," the necessity of continuing production and publication of the same character.

The consequences of these features of the system call for lengthier comment. Let us note the results, first, on the individual. The student is really compelled to specialize five years to get his doctor's degree, for he usually begins in his junior college year. The work of the three graduate years, however, is in both spirit and method greatly different from regular college work, even when this has involved a bachelor's thesis. On his entrance into the graduate period he is suddenly plunged into severely special work, and if he is a man whose blood is warm within, has no little difficulty in reconciling the new experience with the old. The seminary method gives him something of a shock. If he is really a humanist in spirit, his sentiment will more likely than not be that of a graduate student whom I heard remark with much energy, by way of comment on the work done about the sacred table: "What *can* there be about learning to make it so stupid?"

But the embryo doctor has brought good will with him; and when he is told that this manner of work is good for his soul, that everyone

else has done it, and, above all, that it is really necessary if he is to get a good position, the effects of the shock wear away, and the spirit of scholarship gradually and surely takes hold. By the end of three years of intense specialization, what with seminary courses, journal clubs, the reading of learned periodicals, the hearing of planetary prodigies of erudition representing learned societies or famous centers of graduate work, what with constant association with specialists and infrequent contact with the world of flesh and blood, and what with the dissertation, the system has done its work so well that the candidate has thoroughly acquired that great desideratum of the scholar, the scientific temper. He worships method, despises style, or anything else that might relieve his work of the dulness which he has already learned to confuse with scholarship, is pedantically and solemnly accurate and exhaustive, treats infinitesimally unimportant molehills of detail as if they were mountains of truth, consecrates his life to research and talks of a mission, calls himself a scholar, cultivates a pallor and a stoop and sits like his grandsire carved in alabaster, creeps into a jaundice from fear of being called popular, looks with a superior air upon men of the older fashion who have wisely forgotten most of what he is so proud of possessing, regards himself as too good for the teaching of anything but advanced courses—and really expects that his dissertation will be read.

It is hardly accurate to say that the finished product of the system has the scholarly attitude; it is rather true that a certain conception of the scholarly attitude has *him*. He began by narrowing himself in order to acquire the attitude, and ended by becoming the slave of the attitude, which, if he is not naturally *mens sana in corpore sano*, and gifted with more than the average sense of humor, keeps him narrow forever. His training has taken him away from men rather than mingled him with them. It has discouraged wide reading and broad sympathies, and the habit of contemplation. It has concentrated and dwarfed him, instead of expanding and mellowing him: "as keen as a razor blade, and, I sometimes think, as narrow," as he has been described. He has had every encouragement to become so. The system, recognizing that in three years it cannot make a man both broad and keen, elects to make him keen, and to leave the matter of breadth to circumstance, with a sop to the Cerberus

of conscience in the pleasant fiction that the candidate will master his whole field through the writing of his dissertation.

I have allowed myself a manner of treatment which might be mistaken for exaggeration if it did not bear the mark of humor. To tell the truth, I have never met more than one or two monsters of erudition such as I have described. Most young doctors are becomingly modest, are guiltless of dangerous excess of special learning, and also really possess a considerable amount of general knowledge. 'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'twill serve.

It might not be so bad if the graduate had a chance to recover himself after taking his degree and getting his instructorship, for a moderate amount of discipline is a good thing. But where is his promotion to come from? The tyranny of the system again makes itself felt. He must write more, and publish it, and it must again be scholarly, and according to the prescription of the system. Occupied as he is in routine work, he has only a limited amount of leisure, and of course his conscience—if not the head of his department or his president—tells him it must go into original research. He has learned to think that those who hold his fortune in the hollow of their hand are watching, not his teaching, but his investigation.

Everyone is of course aware that few of those who sit upon the throne pursue to the end the policy which they openly declare, but everyone is equally certain that the young instructor feels compelled to act on the assumption that they will. Therefore he must check up everything in his line which appears in new books and periodicals, and—heaven help him!—he must read it. "If we keep abreast of the technical literature of our specialty," inquires Professor Calvin Thomas, "when shall we have time to improve our minds?" The young instructor could answer him. Revivalists used to define eternity as a period exceeding the length of time required for a bird to carry the earth, grain by grain, to the moon. To a philological audience it would be appropriate to describe it as an existence long enough to enable a student of literature to read everything unliterary which is written about literature; and to the ordinary assemblage of persons the threat of such an eternity would be terrifying enough to satisfy the extremest prophet of the wrath to come. Surely of making many books there *is* no end.

I have been speaking of the effect of the system upon the individual. If these results concerned him alone, it would hardly be worth while to object. But they do not concern him alone. They concern the equipment, and, what is more important, the ideals of the great mass of undergraduates. And not only are those undergraduates affected who are looking for culture, in that they are often robbed of the right to have men of broad understanding and sympathy to set before them the golden treasure of our literary heritage; the effect is even more pernicious on those who are desirous of following as a profession the teaching of literature. Hearing emphasis misplaced, they naturally themselves learn to misplace it. Barren as they are of both broad knowledge of their subject as a whole, and of particular knowledge of a single phase of it—for the latter could not really be acquired in the short undergraduate period, and expansion was not the predominating purpose—they carry to the high school with their miserably insufficient equipment the petty and imperfect ways of their smattering of specialization, and only add to the already long list of university imitations in secondary education.

When I say, next, that the results of the system affect most of all the graduate student, I have simply shown how it works in a circle. It is as true of philological as of geological deserts that they tend to perpetuate themselves. If you are observant, you have already seen in the attitude of undergraduates the effect of the present-day overemphasis upon the mathematical, or mechanical, or, as it is more often termed, the scientific spirit in the teaching of literature. The rising generation of students is so accustomed to it that many of them are incapable of recognizing teachers of ripe experience, genuine wisdom, and real breadth of literary scholarship. They prefer the business-like régime of the young doctor, who gives them plenty of heads and subheads, dates and other data, and specifies the exact ratio which notes should bear to assigned reading, is perfectly sure of his ground, and gives them his conclusions in such wise that they may be taken down without the labor of thinking. The generations since madness got into our method are so far few: there are still oases; but if we have a long enough succession of dry and literatureless seasons, the study of literature, and all other humanistic study, will become the dry and thirsty land where no water is that Irving

Babbitt considers them already. "The humanist who at present enters college teaching," he writes, "should not underestimate the difficulties he is likely to encounter. He will find a literature ancient and modern controlled by a philological syndicate, a history dehumanized by the abuse of scientific method, and a political economy that that has never been humane."¹

We are often told in these days, with considerable insistence, that any subject is cultural if pursued in the liberal spirit, with the implication that one subject is about as good as any other. Without stopping to argue the question, which would involve us in the attempt to construct a definition of culture, I remind teachers of literature and the humanities in general that the reverse is almost as true. When a student comes out of a course in literature saying that the nearest approach to literary appreciation his instructor ever made was to comment on the fact that in a certain paragraph of the author there were fifty-six occurrences of the sibilant *s*, one may be forgiven for drawing the conclusion that, in some cases, like mercy in Shakespeare, the humanities are not themselves that oft seem so.

Thus far I have been speaking of the injurious effect of the spirit of graduate study upon culture. But its defenders will say that its faults should be endured for the sake of the fact that it fosters scholarship. I am not convinced that it does foster scholarship. Quite the contrary, it seems to me that it does great damage to life and learning by fostering an imperfect ideal of scholarship.

Knowledge of method and the habit of accuracy and patience and industry do not alone constitute scholarship. Special familiarity with a single phase of a subject without an acquaintance with the whole on which to found it is not a very high type of scholarship. It may indeed be that once in a great while in some field of learning a doctor may have found out something hitherto undiscovered which is of real value; but most people will agree that this is in the nature of accident. Real scholarship has content, not merely accuracy and form. Real scholarship is the result of mature intellectual experience, and of such experience in life as few men possess in their graduate days. Facts must not only be accumulated; they must be interpreted,

¹My paper is not a compilation. If it has any value, it is because the views expressed in it are the result of experience, and are entirely independent.

and related with human experience in such a way that the labor of their accumulation shall not be lost to life. There is a time element in scholarship. The real scholar must have lived: seen the cities and learned the minds of men, loved, married—if he can afford it—and played a part in the wide and universal theater.

And real scholarship is more or less spontaneous. It is not dependent for existence, nor very greatly for growth, upon the fostering of any system. Real scholarship is not a hothouse growth, but a hardy plant with roots deep in the soil, drawing nourishment from its natural surroundings. It may indeed be cultivated; but its cultivation is a matter of watering and fertilizing the root right where it is, and of giving it time and space—not of digging it up and transferring it to an artificial environment, and forcing it—and contemplates the scholar who is like a tree standing by the river of waters, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season. The university president should not be forgetful to entertain good teachers, for thereby some have entertained scholars unawares.

And now, before leaving my diagnosis, with the permission of Master Izaak Walton I will tell you a short tale: A scholar, a preacher I should say, that was to preach to procure the approbation of a parish, that he might be their lecturer, had got from his fellow pupil the copy of a sermon that was first preached with great commendation by him that composed it: and though the borrower preached it word for word, as it was at first, yet was it utterly disliked as it was preached by the second to his congregation: which the sermon-borrower complained of to the lender of it: and thus was answered: "I lent you, indeed, my fiddle, but not my fiddlestick; for you are to know that everyone cannot make music with my words, which are fitted to my own mouth."

Decipimur specie recti. We are doing in our time what the aftercomers of Raphael and Michelangelo did, what the Hellenistic sculptors and the Alexandrian poets did after the golden age of Greek art. Without either inspiration or originality, or ability to comprehend the great works before them, they copied the most noticeable characteristics of their masterful examples, and put forth an art full of mannerisms. And we, without the German sincerity in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake; with neither German capacity

for detail nor German endurance either in study or in digestion—or absorption; without their great libraries and museums—are with solemn faces copying the outward forms of German scholarship—among them its dissertation and its seminary, its devotion to the scientific method and delicatessen and other things too well known to require mention—without achieving a great result once in a generation. And so, my scholar, you are to know, that as the ill-pronunciation or ill-accenting of words in a sermon spoils it, so the lack of German qualities in your employment of the German method, makes you to lose your labor; and you are to know, that though you have the German fiddle, that is, the very method and ideals with which you see him write great books, yet you have not his fiddlestick.

What has become of the humanism that translates literature into life by great writing and teaching? There is work to be done in literature, but it is not for fledgelings. Where are our American Jebbs and Jowetts and Butchers and Boissiers, our Brunetières and Mommsens? Are we never to have another Lowell or Longfellow in our chairs of literature?

We treat literature as a phenomenon to be accounted for and related to other phenomena, as a quarry to be worked, or as a mound or mine of erudition to be burrowed into. Rather than allow one jot or tittle to pass from the law of the system till all be fulfilled, we employ our imported method even in the absence of worthy material to employ it upon. We write articles and dissertations and read papers which possess little interest save that attaching to them as examples of method, form, accuracy, and exhaustiveness; which have an intrinsic value so insignificant that even the five or ten people in the world who are interested must have it pointed out to them; and which immediately join the unregretted seven thousand of yesterday. We borrow our *modus operandi* from the scientist, or at least employ methods identical with his. I am not sure that he has not borrowed ours; in either case the discredit reflected upon us is the same. We say to the scientist—and the depth of our degradation is manifest in the fact that we say it with pride: *our* laboratory is the seminar, and we can show you method as impeccably scientific as your own.

But I protest that literature is an art, not a science. Its essence and effect—the qualities which distinguish it from other branches

of learning—are not susceptible of mathematical measurement, or scientific analysis. To treat it as a mass of matter is comparable to the study of a painting by measuring and cataloguing its details, making a chemical analysis of its colors, and tabulating the results in percentages. All this may develop a certain measure of familiarity with the painting, but it is not the study of the painter's art until the painting begins to be understood as a whole, and assimilated, and it is not a commendable study of art anyway if a poor picture or a mutilated fragment is chosen to the neglect of a masterpiece.

And when I speak of literature as an art, I am not thinking merely of form and Epicurean delight, but of content as well, and of the labor of literary study. I am thinking of the long apprenticeship which must be served in the acquisition of the critical faculty, and of the breadth and depth of knowledge and the maturity of thought necessary to the mastery of the content of any literature. I am not thinking of comparative literature in English translation, nor of the study of literary types in merely one language—which is a kind of dilettantism trying to look dignified—but of genuine first-hand knowledge based on extensive as well as intensive study.

But I am anticipating. My purpose in the first part of my paper is merely to point out that our lack of unity is one source of danger to the study of literature. My next concern will be to suggest a remedy.

[*To be continued*]